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ABSTRACT

Nebraska, like the rest of the nation, is experiencing a shortage of teachers in the areas of special education, English as a second language (ESL), mathematics, science, and early childhood education. In addition, a growing emphasis on the importance of teacher quality has collided with the reality of a shortage of qualified teachers. Chadron State College (CSC), in western Nebraska, is implementing several strategies for teacher recruitment and education. One project unifies course offerings in early childhood and special education at CSC and Western Nebraska Community College. Students are involved in coursework and field experiences that support natural, inclusive environments. CSC participates in a program that integrates early reading, bilingual education, and ESL programs across the state through interdisciplinary coursework and training opportunities within communities and higher education institutions. CSC has two early childhood laboratories that focus on hands-on learning; parent interaction; relationships with peers, parents, and children; and field experiences in developmentally appropriate environments with child-centered learning opportunities. CSC collaborates with area community colleges to articulate the transfer of credits and build smooth transitions for those desiring to improve their education. College faculty are implementing a system to assess the performance of graduating teachers using multiple assessment measures. (Contains 22 references) (TD)

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SO WHAT IF EDUCATION SURVIVES!
--WHO CARES AND WHO SHOULD

Introduction

Schools in rural areas and small towns face difficult challenges in serving the needs of children and education. Historically, rural schools have offered unique benefits and attributes – for educators, students and communities. Rural and small town schools including higher education institutions in rural areas have pioneered many successful education reform tools still in widespread use today. Tools such as peer assistance, multi-grade classrooms, block scheduling, mentoring projects, site based management, and cooperative learning.

The difficulties of high-poverty, low-achieving urban schools in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers are well-documented, but less attention has been focused on the struggles faced by rural school districts in achieving the same goal. "Low salaries, aging school buildings and limited opportunities for professional development are just a few of the reasons that teachers are discouraged from working in rural school districts." "Rural school districts are going to have just as much difficulty as their urban counterparts placing highly qualified educators in every classroom by 2006."(Houston, P., 2002).

The success of rural education is linked with what makes rural and small America unique. Rural schools serve over 40 percent of our nation's students, but receive only 22 percent of federal education funding (NEA, 2002). The size of the community contributes to the challenges and yet serves as a strength among rural schools, educators, parents and communities.

Rural communities depend on their schools to serve many functions beyond the primary mission of educating children. Rural schools are often the single employer in their area and rural schools serve as the social, recreational and cultural foundation of their community.
Many rural school districts are under funded and some lack a steady stream of financial support. Moreover, they are disadvantaged by size as well as geography. For example, when rural districts apply for grants, the resulting funds are based on the number of students which is often too small to accomplish the purpose of the grant.

Rural educators also serve many roles in their communities and face many challenges. Some of these being lower salaries and benefits, lack of access to professional development opportunities, professional isolation, preparation for multiple subjects and grade levels, multiple extracurricular duties, and lack of understanding about special needs of the students.

Who Cares and Who Should

"Children are our most precious resource". "Children can't wait". "It takes a village to raise a child and a child to raise a village". Each of these statements as well as other documentation and research contributed to the *No Child Left Behind Act* signed by President Bush in January 2002. This Act is the most sweeping reform of the elementary and secondary education act (ESEA) since 1965 when ESEA was enacted. It redefines the federal role in K-12 education and will help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers as well as build interconnections between learning in the early years and life long learning.

The Act is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. This Act offers individual states greater "flexibility for accountability" through funding for innovation in educational programs from elementary schools all the way through post-baccalaureate (www.ed.gov/offices/OESE.esea/.p.1).

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Chadron State College is best known for teacher education and the high quality of educators who enter the teaching profession as a result of the undergraduate education received at Chadron State. In an effort to support the goals of *No Child Left Behind*, Chadron State College is in a unique position to offer a substantial impact to the educational outcomes proposed by creating a more integrated approach in methods of teaching.

Most Americans think education begins at age 5 with kindergarten. But research tells us that children are really learning from the moment they are born. For millions of youngsters, the reality is that their early learning is a joint enterprise between parents, early childhood educators, and their environment. The impact of that learning filters into the later years of school and lifestyle commitments as they move into the adult stage of life.

Today, 11.9 million children young than 5 in the United States or about six in 10 spend part of their waking hours in the care of people other than parents: relatives, caregivers operating out of their homes, workers in child care center, Head Start staff members, and teachers in state-financed pre-kindergartens among them. The quality of the early care and education that young children receive in such settings sets the tenor of their days and lays the building blocks for future academic success (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

Likewise, nationwide some 2.2 million teachers will be needed in the next 10 years because of attrition and retirement and increased student enrollment. Almost 40 percent of Nebraska teachers will be eligible for retirement in the next 10 years, according to a report prepared by staff of the Legislative Fiscal Office and the Legislature's Revenue Committee.

This is happening at a time when the number of teachers college graduates has declined 17.5 percent at the University of Nebraska campuses and 12.3 percent at state college campuses. The number of teachers graduating from private institutions in the state of Nebraska actually increased 34.5 percent, but those schools trained just less than 30 percent of the state's teaching graduates in 1999 (Fulwider, 2000). Only 10 percent of current high school graduates want to pursue a career in education (ACT, 2000). In urban districts, 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession during their first teaching and in suburban and rural districts 30-40 percent flee the profession during two years. An additional concern for Nebraska is the 10.2 percent decline in male teachers as well as the quality of teachers being produced in higher education settings (U.S. Census, 2000; NEA, 2003).

The Organization for Quality Teachers report that less than 50 percent of all graduates of Nebraska teachers' colleges stay and teach public schools. Many leave to teach in other higher paying states, and other s opt for lucrative professions. The January, 2000, Education Week reports that "less graduates who are eligible for certification ever take teaching jobs."

Nebraska ranks 39th in the nation in total average teacher compensation (salary benefits, social security and retirement, not health insurance) (2000 AFT survey). Nebraska ranks 45th in the nation in the average salary for teachers $33,836, and Nebraska ranks 45th in beginning teacher salaries: $21,949 vs. $25,735 (NEA, 2003).

A historic turnover in the teaching profession is on the way. More than a million veteran teachers are nearing retirement. America will need two million new teachers in the next decade, and Nebraska will need 8,272 in the next 10 years (Filwider, 2000). The result is a high demand for new college graduates with teaching degrees in this era. Fewer young people are attracted to teaching as a career, in part because of salaries, safe working conditions, lack of respect and inadequate support. Many who earn a teaching degree never teach. Indeed, in Nebraska colleges graduated 1,537 teaching degreed students. But only 527 accepted teaching jobs in Nebraska (NEA, 2003). The remainder took out-of-state teaching jobs or joined the private sector where the pay is much better. So what, who cares and who should?

Impact of Teacher Shortage

Studies conclude that early childhood education and quality education at all levels of learning do make a difference (Education Week, pg. 8). The issue of the quality of teaching has taken center stage in education discussions throughout the country. A growing body of evidence confirms what common sense has suggested all along: Good teaching is a make-or-break factor in how well students learn.

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The focus on quality, however, has run smack into the reality of a growing shortage of well-qualified teachers. To a large extent, that shortage is a problem of supply, demand and distribution. Teacher preparation programs may produce a sufficient quantity of graduates, but many of these graduates do not go into teaching, and the attrition rate of those who do is high. The result is there are not enough good teachers in the nation's classrooms, especially in areas of rapid population growth, hard-to-staff schools and high demand subjects such as mathematics, science, bilingual and special education.

A growing number of states including Nebraska and districts are trying various strategies to address these problems. Unfortunately, these efforts are not always guided by reliable information. There are a few strategies that when properly conceived and implemented, seem undeniably effective. Many other strategies, however, lack both proven effectiveness and widespread acceptance in spite of the vigorous defense of their proponents.

The impact of a shortage of teachers includes larger classrooms, less personal one-on-one attention, more work for already overloaded teachers, need for more support such as paraprofessionals that may or may not be educationally prepared, concern for children with special needs or gifted and talented, more behavior problems, and ultimately, a less than quality educational experience to prepare children for the today let alone the future.

A critical shortage of teachers for 2002-03 has been reported by National Education Association for the following areas: emotionally, mentally and physically handicapped; speech and language impaired, English for speakers of other languages, visually impaired, Family and Consumer Sciences, Industrial Arts/Technology, mathematics, science and early childhood education.

Demographics of Nebraska and Chadron State College

Nebraska covers 76,872 miles with a per person capita of 22.3 percent.. In the 2001 census, there were 1,713,235 people showing a .1 percent increase since 2000. Twenty six percent of the population is under 18 while 13.6 percent are over 65. Over half of the population is female and 89.6 percent are white with growing populations of Black, Hispanic, Asian and Latino populations in recent years. Nebraska has the larger two parent working households in the nation and a large percentage of persons with disabilities per capita of population. The per capita income for 2001 was $20,234 with 9.7 percent of the population below poverty. Agriculture remains the predominant income while non-farm is growing by 25 percent (U.S. Census, 2002).

Chadron State College is located in western Nebraska approximately 825 miles from the capital. The service region for the campus is a 250 mile radius reaching into South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado. Approximately 80 percent of the students who graduate from CSC stay in the region and come from primarily white, rural families.

Strategies for Recruiting Teachers

The issue of teacher recruitment has several dimensions. Recruitment itself can focus on attracting people into the teaching profession, in general, or into positions in particular districts and schools. States and districts employ various strategies to accomplish these objectives, including pre-college orientation and internship opportunities, college scholarship and loan-forgiveness programs, and salary or bonus incentives for teachers.

In addition to actual recruitment efforts, experts believe a number of other factors affect the ability of the teaching profession to attract candidates and of schools and districts to attract teachers. Potential candidates' perceptions of teaching -- including their expected job satisfaction – are held as important, especially in comparison with their perceptions of other professions. Comparative starting salaries repeatedly are cited as key factors, as are expected working conditions: school environment, interaction with and support from colleagues and school leaders, workload, lack of respect and appreciation, and career growth opportunities.

Hiring practices are identified as another important factor in teacher recruitment. There are many stories of teachers choosing one district over another because of differences in the efficiency and friendliness of hiring practices or because of differences in districts' policies concerning out-of-field teaching. Likewise, stories abound of frustration among younger teachers in districts where rigid seniority systems make it difficult for younger teachers to find satisfactory job placements not to mention the lack of support from administrators.

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Finally, many experts believe teacher mobility is an important consideration related to recruitment. (www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html)

Nebraska, like many other states, and specifically, Chadron State College strive to find recruitment strategies that will work in the effort to attract students to the teaching profession as well as increase retention within the state.

Collaborative, Teamwork Models

Panhandle Unified Rural Education (P.U.R.E.) Project

In 1998, the Nebraska Department of Education in collaboration with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services received federal funds to implement Supporting Change and Reform in Interdisciplinary Personnel Training (Nebraska S.C.R.I.P.T) projects in the state. Chadron State College was one of the institutions to benefit from the four year grant.

The grant project, titled P.U.R.E. (Panhandle Unified Rural Education) project set a goal to create an educational certification seeking program unifying course offerings in early childhood and special education programs at Chadron State College and Western Nebraska Community College. The endorsement or certification process was the first attempt at collaboration among faculty, departments, community partners and families to build a workforce of well-qualified early childhood educators who will be prepared to meet the diverse needs of children and families. The following schematic map identifies a visualization of the partners involved in the process.

Since it's inception, approximately 25 students have been involved in coursework and field experiences which support natural, inclusive environments. Large numbers of faculty and staff have been involved in training, and family partners have supported faculty in-service training as well as served as primary presenters in classroom settings. Professional presenters has been invited to Chadron State College to educate faculty on family-focused partnerships, natural environments, C.O.A.C.H. model of service delivery, creating effective teams, inclusion practices, and much more.

Natural, inclusive field experience sites are being identified for placement of special education/early childhood students as well as building an understanding among area schools for the necessity of using a COACH model for early development networking.

Nebraska Early Literacy, Language and Learning Communication (NELLLC) Project

Nebraska received a million dollar grant to assist with collaboration projects among faculty from two and four year institutions of higher education. This grant project has integrated Heads Up! Reading, Read for Joy, bilingual education and ESL programs across the state through interdisciplinary coursework and training opportunities within communities and higher education institutions.

Rethinking Education and Assessment Challenges in Higher Education (R.E.A.C.H.) Pilot Project

Grant funding is being sought for the latest pilot project to provide a continuum of activities from the P.U.R.E. project as well as build an interdisciplinary support team among faculty from Education, Special Education, Family & Consumer Sciences and Psychology. Preliminary plans for the project include more hours in the undergraduate program geared toward field experiences which allow students the apply knowledge base content in natural, inclusive environments. Family and community partners will continue to play a valuable role in the training process as well as articulations with community college personnel.

Survey results from Field Experience

Chadron State College is fortunate enough to have two high quality early childhood laboratories available to students. The laboratory housed on the CSC campus has been state licensed since it's inception in 1962, and nationally accredited since 1989. A research project was recently conducted with students who are enrolled in the elementary/early childhood program at Chadron State College and who work in the laboratories.

Fifteen students seeking early childhood/elementary or child development degrees were randomly selected to complete a survey. All fifteen students completed the survey and report the experience of applying their knowledge

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base content from the classroom with their ability to work directly with children as highly valuable. The majority of the students worked three to four years reporting their growth to be extensive in the understanding of development and best practices. "Hands on learning, parent interaction, relationships built with peers, parents and children, high quality developmentally appropriate environment with child centered learning opportunities have made me a better teacher" (Anderson, R., 2002).

Collaboration with Community College Partners

Numerous education-reform plans have opened the doors for collaboration among 2 and 4 years institutions of higher education in an effort to articulate the transfer of credits and build a smooth transition for individuals desiring to improve their education. Chadron State College is working closely with Western Nebraska Community College, Mid-Plains Community College, McCook Community College and Casper Community College to build such agreements.

Each of these two year colleges are within the service region of Chadron State College and serve as valuable partners in the quest for building a higher quality workforce in education.

Nebraska Partnership for Quality Teacher Education Project

Grant projects across Nebraska are taking place in order to build a more effective educational experience for individuals. Currently, pilot pedagogy examinations to assess the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs is taking place along with the establishment of formal processes for ensuring collaboration among pedagogy and content faculty. College faculty are working to implement a graduate follow-up system to assess performance of graduating teachers, and design and implement an institutional monitoring system with multiple assessment measures of student performance and program quality.

Innovative programs that will attract and retain qualified teachers in order to reduce the shortage of Nebraska teachers, particularly in high poverty urban and rural areas are being developed on an on-going basis.

Nebraska T.E.A.C.H. project focuses on mentoring potential teachers through educational programs with tuition, child care or other financial support

Rural Education Achievement Program (R.E.A.P.) providing rural education supporters money and flexibility to hire teachers, fund development, meet special needs in high poverty areas.

Safe and Drug Free School programs; Scholarships and Loan-Forgiveness Programs; Targeted Recruitment Strategies; Financial Incentives; Early Recruitment Practices; Changing Hiring Practices; Teacher Mentor Programs; Housing and Living Costs; Troops to Teachers Program; Incentives for Male Teachers; Merit Pay; Investing in Teachers; etc.

Conclusion

The future of our country and state lie in our hands. Education continues to hold the answers to breaking the cycle of poverty and understanding the diversity of cultures making Nebraska their home. Who cares about our future and who should? The choice is up to us ... you and me.

We can whine about teacher shortages, budgets and not enough money or we can begin to rethink, refine and renew our faith in the power of the people. Hal Urban, a teacher for thirty five years loving every minute of it, states in his book "Life's Greatest Lessons", "success is in the doing, not in the getting". "Let each person become all that he/she was created capable of being."

- *Successful people accept life as it is, with all its difficulties and challenges*
- *Successful people develop and maintain a positive attitude toward life*
- *Successful people build good relationships*
- *Successful people have a sense of direction and purpose*
- *Successful people are action –oriented and have a strong desire to learn*
- *Successful people maintain high standards and understand the difference between existing and living*

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We (you and I) have a challenge to insure that **'Education Survives'**. *Education does matter! Education does make a difference! Education is the key that unlocks the doors to understanding an ever changing world bulging with information and technology.*

Research findings spell out the concern for teacher shortages as well as offer a significant challenge for applying the freedom of creativity through strong leadership from all who assume the role of an educator whether it be administrators, parents, family members, teachers or providers. The challenge of funding programs with less time and money truly opens a door to opportunities for making best practices even better as collaboration and integration cause the educational system to focus on 'what is best for children' rather than 'what is best for society'. Historically, educators (you and I) have faced tough times before and with a renewed focus will survive challenging times again. Together we must rethink and redefine the purpose of education and focus on positive outcomes.

One thing is for certain, the educational system will change. Perhaps the traditional small, rural school will lead the way in building partnerships between children, families, schools and communities. Perhaps they will define successful collaboration, renew the trust in the administrative structure supports quality education, and insist on communities working as a team settling for nothing less than safe and healthy environments as well as respect and appreciation for the privilege to be educated in a **free** *society.*

Education will survive if educators lead the way to rethinking, redefining and renewing the mission of education. Education will survive through collaborative partnerships willing to close the gaps and knock down the barriers that prevent strong bridges being built. Education will survive if educators are willing to assume the risks necessary to make the world a better place for **ALL** *children!*

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